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SUBJECT: COLOMBIANS SEE UBIQUITOUS VENEZUELAN THREAT

REF: CARACAS 1443; BOGOTA 2449; BOGOTA 3313

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

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11. (C/NF) Colombian officials and observers are increasingly concerned about the long-term threat Venezuela poses to their country. Experts inside and outside the government worry that any small incident along the tense border could spark a costly confrontation, given the decrease in communication and increase in tension between the two countries. Most believe the main risk comes from an unintentional incident, although influential GOC advisors claim to be equally worried that President Chavez could start a war to distract Venezuelans from their economic woes. Still, most of our interlocutors perceive a broader threat that transcends the current crisis -- they believe Venezuela has isolated Colombia, that its arms purchases will allow it to defeat Colombia militarily, and that Venezuelan trade restrictions will cause significant economic damage. Real or not, the perception of the threat posed by Venezuela has widespread implications for Colombian society. The perception that the USG is not supporting Colombia is becoming an issue in public commentary and private conversation. End Summary.

NEAR-TERM WORRIES: BORDER FLARE-UP,  
CHAVEZ'S UNPREDICTABILITY

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12. (C/NF) Few in Colombia assess that Venezuelan President Chavez plans a full-scale attack on Colombian territory, but officials and commentators alike see a much greater risk that the heightened tension and increased Venezuelan military presence along the border could spark an unintentional armed border conflict. Top Uribe security advisor Paola Holguin told us that even though it was clear the GBRV could not move 15,000 troops to the border as announced (ref A), she worried that what she called the "poorly trained and undisciplined" state of Venezuelan troops could cause them to open fire without provocation. An analysis in leading newsweekly "Cambio" pointed out that the lack of communication between the two countries -- along with the atmosphere of mutual

recrimination and doubt -- could cause such an incident to spiral out of control. The analysis concluded that although war is not imminent, it is much closer now than during any previous bilateral crisis.

13. (C/NF) These concerns are multiplied by what many here see as Venezuela's unpredictability. Presidential Communications Director Jorge Mario Eastman told us this volatility made it particularly difficult to predict the Venezuelan leader's reactions in crises like the current one. Similarly, Carlos Morales, MFA Acting Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, expressed frustration over the difficulties his ministry had experienced in trying to predict the GBRV's decision-making. Holguin cautioned us that "a dictator like Chavez" calculates risk and reward differently from that of democratic governments like the USG and GOC --making his moves hard to foresee. Colombian media frequently portray Chavez as mercurial or even clownish, but our GOC interlocutors believe he is quite rational -- just not predictable.

14. (C/NF) Still, Holguin told us she and other Casa de Narino insiders worry about a full-on Venezuelan invasion, even though the current conventional wisdom predicts otherwise. She argued Chavez was desperate to distract his people from Venezuela's economic crisis, likening the situation to Argentina's 1982 seizure of the

Falklands/Malvinas Islands from the United Kingdom. Holguin contended the GBRV had killed the nine Colombians, one Peruvian, and one Venezuelan whose bodies were discovered on October 24 in the Venezuelan border state of Tachira (ref B) and argued the act proved the Venezuelan regime's ruthlessness in attempting to provoke a war with Colombia.

15. (C/NF) Virtually all local observers assess Colombia would dominate Venezuela in any armed conflict, as its years of experience and better-trained personnel would outweigh any Venezuelan hardware edge gained from its recent spree of arms purchases. Nevertheless, many worry about the havoc Venezuela could inflict in even a short conflict. General Gustavo Matamoros, commander of the Colombian military's Joint Caribbean Command (which includes long stretches of border territory in the northeast), told us earlier in the year that Colombian armed forces in the area are far superior to those of the GBRV, but conceded that the GBRV could inflict unacceptable physical and political damage in border areas before being defeated rapidly. Similarly, Eastman noted that given the relatively short distances involved, a single Venezuelan bomber could easily drop a bomb on a major Colombian city -- an outcome the GOC could not tolerate. Holguin argues that Chavez -- whom she called "a soldier who has never fought a battle" -- simply does not understand these human costs of combat the way that Colombians do, or else he would not risk it.

LONGER TERM WORRIES: REGIONAL ISOLATION,  
MILITARY IMBALANCE, ECONOMIC DECLINE

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16. (S/NF) Beyond the current crisis, we hear similar perceptions about the broader threat Venezuela poses to Colombia. First, officials and observers alike worry Chavez's regional diplomacy (fueled in equal measures by oil and ideology) has left the GOC alone in the region and surrounded by unfriendly countries. The MFA's Morales told us of GOC concern that this has left Colombia isolated, with few regional powers willing to speak out against Chavez's aggressive rhetoric. Holguin said the region's current silence only emboldened Chavez to continue to speak and act aggressively -- and to keep generating crises. Although she credited the Brazilian Senate's November 11 vote to delay Venezuelan entry into Mercosur with Chavez's newly-toned down rhetoric, she hoped other countries would be more willing to stand

up and actively denounce Chavez. Professor Sandra Borda of the Universidad de los Andes, an international affairs specialist and member of the GOC's Mission on Foreign Policy, told us that President Uribe had told a recent Mission meeting that he believed this was a deliberate GBRV strategy aimed at spreading Bolivarianism and isolating Colombia as one of the few remaining opponents of the ideology.

¶7. (C/NF) Second, GOC officials in particular are worried about Chavez's recent arms acquisitions from Russia, Iran, and other countries outside the hemisphere. Morales told us the hardware increasingly allowed the GBRV to back up its hostile rhetoric, while Holguin conceded that the improved weaponry would eventually overwhelm the GOC's current advantages. This is creating political pressure on the GOC to respond in kind. According to local press, the lower House of Congress will hold hearings in early December to determine whether the GOC is adequately prepared to face the Venezuelan threat, while U Party Senator Juan Carlos Velez publicly insisted the GOC needed to purchase upgraded air defense systems to counter the Venezuelan threat. Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva told the Ambassador the GOC was also interested in discussing the acquisition of anti-tank systems. Professor Borda noted this dynamic could spread into a dangerous bilateral arms race, given that neither country finds credible the other side's claims to be focusing on defensive capabilities.

¶8. (C/NF) Finally, Colombians worry about short- and medium-term damage to their economy caused by sharply decreased trade with their number-two trade partner. September exports to Venezuela dropped by 52%, compared with September 2008 numbers. For the first half of October, Colombian exports were down 77% compared to the same period in 2008. Colombian imports from Venezuela are down 56% for the first nine months of 2009. Given the high degree of interdependence in border areas, such as Cucuta, trade restrictions and temporary border closings take a tremendous toll on the border region, and the GBRV has taken other punitive steps that will continue to drive down trade (ref C). Paradoxically, many in the GOC and Colombian business community see potential long-term benefits for Colombia in the drop off in bilateral trade, as it will put greater pressure on Colombian exporters to diversify their markets.

¶9. (C/NF) Alfredo Ramos, Director of Economic Integration at the Ministry of Trade, described the two countries as natural trading partners, noting that neither can readily replace the other. Nonetheless, he said it was entirely possible that Chavez could drive bilateral trade down to virtually zero in the coming months, suggesting continued downward pressure on Colombian economic growth against a backdrop of increasing unemployment and stagnant economic activity. In a letter to President Obama dated October 29, 2009, President Uribe presented this same argument as a reason to push forward on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement.

#### USG BECOMING AN ISSUE?

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¶10. (C) On November 17, Foreign Minister Bermudez summoned the Ambassador to express concern about the USG position in the dispute with Venezuela. He suggested that helpful neutrality was not the position the GOC was hoping for, and predicted Uribe would drive this point home in the upcoming visit by Deputy Secretary Steinberg. Perhaps not coincidentally, the lead editorial in leading Colombian paper "El Tiempo" on November 20 focused on the issue of USG neutrality.

COMMENT: LEGITIMATE CONCERN OR PARANOIA?

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¶11. (C/NF) We can argue the extent to which Colombians have a legitimate reason for concern or are simply paranoid. The point, however, is that worry about Venezuela abounds in Colombian society. It affects politics, diplomacy, the economy, and, increasingly, military doctrine. We are confident that Colombian leadership will maintain calm in its immediate dealings with Caracas, but there will be increasing pressure to demonstrate that Colombia is prepared to deal with its volatile neighbor to the east.

BROWNFIELD